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One Year Later: The Politics and Stories of Post-Earthquake Nepal

Boyer Andrew
Macalester College

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One Year Later: The Politics and Stories of Post-Earthquake Nepal



Boyer, Andrew
Academic Director: Onians, Isabelle
Senior Faculty Advisor: Decleer, Hubert
Project Advisor: Faria, Joseph
Macalester College
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A home near Khangjim, Rasuwa that was damaged in the earthquake. Photo by the author.

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Abstract

A 7.8 magnitude earthquake struck Nepal on April 25th, 2015. This was followed by a second major earthquake of magnitude 7.3 on May 12th, 2015. These disasters took the lives of thousands of Nepali people, destroyed hundreds of thousands of structures, and displaced an estimated two million people. Immediately following the disaster, there was an outpouring of humanitarian aid from around the world. This led to a conference where \$4.1 billion USD of reconstruction funds were pledged to Nepal by international donors. Five months later, a new constitution passed into law and an informal blockade of Indian imports – petroleum products, medicine, and other critical goods – descended upon Nepal. A year after the earthquake, the effects of the political climate and other unique challenges in Nepal have shaped the course of reconstruction. I will explore those factors and seek to understand why Nepal remains in a state of partial destruction, twelve months after disaster struck.



1. Epicenter of the two major earthquakes in April and May 2015. Source: Oxfam America – Nepal Earthquake.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks must go out to all of the participants of my interviews. Without their stories and willingness to share, this ISP would lack the spirit of the Nepali people and would be an utter failure. I also want to extend my thanks to the American Red Cross and Nepal Red Cross Society for allowing me to tag along on one of their trips to Rasuwa District. I want to acknowledge the volunteers and staff of All Hands, who whole-heartedly believe in the work they are doing and are willing to share that excitement with near strangers. Finally, I would like to recognize the faculty and staff at SIT who make these projects possible and provide endless guidance and answers to myriad questions.

A few words on context

Over the last twelve months, Nepal has been rocked by both natural and man-made disasters. Two major earthquakes and countless aftershocks have been followed by a new constitution, political upheaval, and a five month blockade. And yet, over a few weeks of talking to people around Kathmandu and in the Rasuwa and Nuwakot districts, the consistent view is one of hope. Hope for rebuilt homes and villages. Hope for political stability and effective governance. Despite the significant challenges of the last twelve months, I believe this story remains one of resilience.



2. A young woman from Langtang. Photo by Lhakpa Tamang Jangba for the Langtang Photo Album.

Introduction

Two earthquakes rattled Nepal to the core – the first on April 25th, 2015 and the second on May 12th, 2015. These major events, along with the many smaller ‘aftershocks’ killed 8,790 people and destroyed nearly half a million homes.¹ One week after the earthquake, organizations such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) had jumped into action, conducting surveys and assessments to “gather, analyze, and publish information about the number of displaced persons, their locations as well as their needs, gathering information on food, shelter, water and sanitation, health, education and safety.”² Countless other organizations, both local and international, also mobilized. Humanitarian aid was the priority in those early weeks – healthcare, food, water, temporary shelter. In the ensuing months, needs shifted from immediate humanitarian aid to the long term rebuilding and resettlement process.³

Coming to Nepal, the earthquake was at the forefront of every discussion and step of the pre-departure process. My home institution nearly did not allow students to go to Nepal because of the United States State Department Travel Warning issued last April. Concerned family members and friends, and an uncertainty as to whether my presence in a post-disaster country would be a burden to locals, made me doubt my decision to come to Nepal. However, over the last few years I have been intrigued by the world of international public health and disaster relief. Part of my undergraduate degree will be a concentration in community and global health. Two years ago I became an EMT, entering the world of pre-hospital emergency care. If I want to pursue a career in the field of global health and disaster relief, I need experience living and working in a country recovering from disaster.

When applying to this program, it was clear in my mind that my ISP should be on a topic related to earthquake relief – it is a logical extension of my studies in the U.S. After my arrival, my doubts about coming to Nepal slowly faded. While it was clear through simple observation that the earthquake was still a part of people’s daily lives, it also became clear that much more was at play than just a single natural disaster. The politics of rebuilding, a second (man-made) disaster known as the blockade, and a mosaic of players all seeking to help people were inextricably linked with the issues I wanted to focus on.

This project has shifted focus countless times as leads come to fruition or to dead-ends. My goal is to pick apart the major events of the last year to explain *why* Nepal remains in a state of partial destruction twelve months after the earthquake. To do this, I will do my best to share important background information, political context, and people’s stories. First, I will talk about generic disaster response, then I will move into the unique political, climatic, and geographic challenges that complicate emergency response in Nepal. I will end with personal stories of the earthquake and an analysis of how these factors have amalgamated into the current state of post-disaster affairs.

¹ (International Organization for Migration 2016) page 3

² (International Organization for Migration 2016) page 7

³ (Israeli 2015) Page 4

Anatomy of Disaster Response

There are five generally accepted phases that occur after a natural disaster.⁴ First, there is the search and rescue phase. In this initial stage, which can last from a few hours to a few weeks, professional and lay responders search through rubble or damaged buildings for any survivors. In Nepal, this search and rescue phase included both international and local responders. Within six hours of the April 25th earthquake, the Indian military had launched “Operation Maitri,” sending ten teams of trained responders and eight helicopters to aid in the search for survivors.⁵ Similarly, U.S. operations were launched in Nepal under the name “Operation Sahayogi Haat” (helping hand, in Nepali) and included human resources, helicopters, and the delivery of emergency aid. Both of these operations also included the evacuation of Indian and American nationals, respectively.⁶ But how exactly does a search and rescue team operate?

To explain, I will walk us through the actions of one British search and rescue team from an organization called *Search and Rescue Assistance in Disasters*, or SARAID. The team starts by arriving onsite within 24 hours of the disaster. They bring with them specialized equipment, such as saws, generators, and search and rescue dogs, as well as food and temporary shelter so they are not a drain on local resources. Then the search begins. The team works with locals to identify buildings or areas where people are suspected to be trapped. Once a building is identified, they swiftly begin searching in the areas where people are most likely to be caught in a void, such as underneath stairwells or structural supports. The team also uses specialized equipment, such as telescopic video cameras, sensitive microphones, thermal imaging cameras, and carbon dioxide detectors to search for signs of human life. Rescue dogs, if available, are also used to identify where survivors may be trapped. Once a possible survivor is identified, rubble is removed by hand and by machine to allow careful egress. This process must be conducted with the utmost care, since moving rubble can destabilize a whole structure. At some point, the difficult decision to move on from a site must be made. Using principles of triage, the coordinating agency (often the United Nations or national government) distributes resources in order to save the most lives – this means calling off the search and transitioning into care for the survivors. The shift from search and rescue to the second phase will often occur five to seven days after the disaster. However, people have survived in collapsed buildings for as long as thirteen days before rescue.⁷

The second phase is one of emergency humanitarian relief. Food, water, temporary shelter for displaced persons, and healthcare services are of primary concern. The length of this phase can vary immensely, ranging from less than a week to years, depending on the infrastructure in place before the disaster, the severity of the disaster, and the availability of

⁴ (Israeli 2015) (Crutchfield 2013)

⁵ (Laskar 2015)

⁶ (U.S. Department of Defense 2015)

⁷ (BBC News 2015)

resources in the aftermath. One year later, parts of Nepal appear to be stuck in this phase. Thousands of people are still living in temporary housing consisting of tarps and corrugated iron (CGI) sheeting. This shelter is not adequate to withstand the elements, particularly in mountain communities where high winds and bad weather have literally blown these temporary homes away. While personal homes remain in limbo, schools, health facilities, and community buildings are being rebuilt at a much faster rate.⁸ This disconnect is often pinned on the vagaries of the National Reconstruction Authority, or NRA. More details will be given on this political issue in the ‘government’ section.

The third phase is of early recovery. During this stage of transition, immediate humanitarian needs have been taken care of and people are generally living in short term shelter that protects them from the elements. Schools may reopen, albeit with classes held outside or in temporary structures. Some locales have transitioned into this phase. In Nuwakot district, some children are going to the schools that have reopened (although space is limited). People are in the process of rebuilding, without government assistance. Food and healthcare are generally available, but facilities have yet to be rebuilt to the pre-earthquake baseline.

The fourth phase is long term recovery and reconstruction. Permanent housing structures, schools, and community buildings are rebuilt during this time. People move out of their temporary housing into long term structures, return to their previous livelihoods or find new employment, and life generally gains more stability. It will be interesting to see how this phase unfolds in Nepal. Will people migrate out of rural areas into the Kathmandu valley? Will people decide to rebuild in their historic home, or will they go to new places and start over? Evidence on both sides have arisen during my research. Jennifer Bradley, a 24 year old American living in Nepal, organized and curated a photo exhibit called “Langtang Rising” in which all of the photographs were taken by Langtangpas.⁹ Jennifer’s project is part of a larger “Langtang Memory Project” which aims to preserve the culture, history, and stories of Langtang. Many of the pictures that are a part of this project were taken by young people who returned to Langtang after the earthquake to be with family and help with the rebuilding process.¹⁰ At the same time, there are people such as Lobsang (whose story can be read in the section entitled “Lobsang”) who left the Langtang valley for Kathmandu after the earthquake.

The fifth and final phase is of long term development. Organizations or support structures that were put into place after a disaster will often remain in communities after reconstruction has been completed. However, the work being done and projects at this point fall into the realm of development – improving livelihoods, living conditions, fighting poverty, and building infrastructure. This phase often includes capacity building and preparing communities for future disasters.

⁸ Bidur, American Red Cross, Rasuwa, April 2016

⁹ Find the full photo album and project on Facebook: www.facebook.com/groups/LangtangPhotoAlbum/

¹⁰ (Bradley 2016)

The Monsoon

The word monsoon is derived from the Arabic word *mausim*, meaning season.¹¹ The monsoon is the seasonal change in direction of the prevailing winds in a region. In Nepal, the monsoon causes distinct wet and dry seasons, with the wet season generally lasting from June to September. While there is still much to be learned about the monsoon, it is hypothesized that the change in winds is due to pressure differentials over large landmasses, such as the Asian continent, and neighboring seas, in this case the Indian Ocean. The summer monsoon brings a mass of wet, warm air from the southwest (Indian Ocean) across the Indian subcontinent until it reaches the towering Himalaya range. Upon reaching this 8,000m wall, the moist air must dump water weight in order to rise and make it over the mountain range.

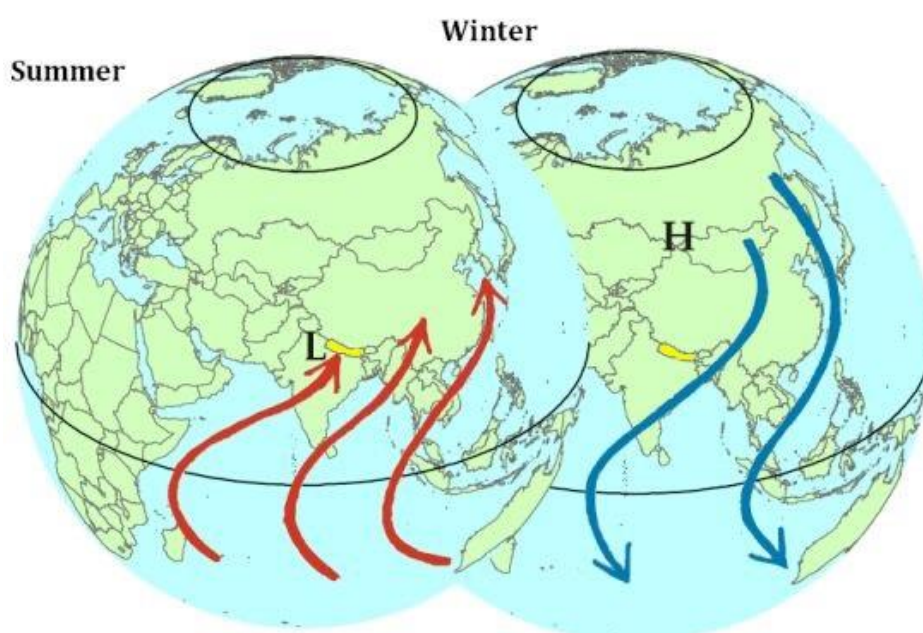
This puts the high,

Tibetan plateau on the east side of the mountains in the rain shadow during the summer monsoon.

This is a main contributor to the semi-arid, nearly desert-like climate of the Tibetan plateau. During the winter months, when the winds reverse, air blows from the heart of the Asian continent in Mongolia to the southwest. This continental air is drier than the air from the ocean, and

geography also puts most of Nepal in the rain shadow of the Himalaya. These factors contribute to the dry and sunny winter months in Nepal.¹²

However, the monsoon means much more than a few cloudy days versus sunshine. Like much of South Asia, Nepal runs on rice. Walking through the streets of Kathmandu, you can see goofy tourists and local teenagers alike wearing shirts that read “Daal Baat Power,



3. General wind directions during the monsoon. The red arrows represent summer, when moisture laden air from the Indian Ocean flows directly over Nepal (yellow). The blue arrows represent the winter, dry season when continental air from Mongolia flows over the Himalaya range and across Nepal. Map adapted from www.dandebate.dk/eng-klima3.htm

¹¹ (Monsoon 2012)

¹² (National Geographic Society - Education 2011)

24 Hour” in reference to the national dish of rice and lentils. Rice is grown during the monsoon season because of the predominance of paddy farming, which requires significant amounts of water. About 80% of livelihoods in Nepal come from farming, which amounts to about 30% of the GDP. Rice is the most commonly grown grain, particularly at lower elevations.¹³ During the earthquake, huge stores of rice seed were destroyed as buildings collapsed. This was a huge cause for concern, because rice is such a critical part of local livelihoods and is a primary food source. To combat this, organizations such as Oxfam distributed rice seed, fertilizer, and agricultural tools to replace what had been lost or damaged.¹⁴

The summer monsoon also replenishes local aquifers, refilling wells and providing drinking water and water for irrigation. In Nepal, where the majority of electricity is hydroelectric, the monsoon also is the driver behind electricity generation in the state. During the dry season (winter) when river flow dips to a yearly minimum, ‘load shedding’ (the ubiquitous euphemism for a power outage in Nepal) reaches the point where there is only power for a few hours each day.¹⁵

In the aftermath of the earthquake, the monsoon presented an impending deadline for distribution of temporary shelter. With homes destroyed and the rains coming, distribution of shelter kits (consisting of a tarp, rope, and a hammer) as well as the slightly more permanent CGI sheeting was prioritized by the government and NGOs.¹⁶ While these shelters were far from watertight or weather-proof, they provided a minimal level of protection from the elements. A year later, many displaced persons and people who have had their homes destroyed are still living under the tarps and CGI distributed last year.

In 2016, the monsoon will disrupt the construction of permanent structures. Ground is currently being broken (in late April) on the first homes being rebuilt with government support. Most homes, particularly if they are being built to earthquake resistant standards, will take at least sixty days to build. This means that the monsoon is practically guaranteed to interrupt the construction process. Concrete can’t cure if it is too wet, roads get washed out impairing the delivery of materials, and pretty much all aspects of the building process are made more challenging.¹⁷

¹³ (Smith 2009)

¹⁴ (Oxfam America 2016)

¹⁵ April and May, the months right before the monsoon, are the times when load shedding is worst. This can make activities that require power (such as writing ISPs) particularly difficult.

¹⁶ (Regmi 2016)

¹⁷ (Soelaksono 2016) (Regmi 2016)

The Blockade

On September 20th, 2015 the Second Constituent Assembly voted with an overwhelming majority to approve the new constitution. This came seven years after the establishment of the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal, which replaced the long standing monarchy in 2006. Within days of the passage of the new constitution, trade across the Nepal-India border had nearly reached a standstill.¹⁸ This stoppage of trade with India was a very big deal, since India accounts for more than 60% of Nepal's foreign trade.¹⁹ It is still unclear whether the blockade was enforced by the Indian government (which denies this account) or Madhesi protestors, who felt their demands for representation were left out of the constitutional process. It is important to note that the Madhesi people are a historically lower class people who have faced discrimination in many forms over the years.²⁰ In all likelihood, it was some combination of the two.



4. People wait to get new LPG cylinders for cooking. Photo from *The Economist* 2015.

Much of the political upheaval was centered on Birgunj, Nepal – a border town that 70% of Indian imports flow through.²¹ Nepal relies on trade with India for most of its petroleum products, many essential medicines and vaccines, and food. In addition, earthquake relief supplies were still flowing over the border, and the interruption of this critical flow of supplies, regardless of the exact cause, had huge repercussions for the people of Nepal. Gas, diesel, and liquid petroleum gas (LPG)²² became scarce, and a nationwide

¹⁸ (Plesch 2015)

¹⁹ (Pokharel 2015)

²⁰ (The Economist 2015)

²¹ (Plesch 2015)

²² LPG is widely used around the world as cooking gas. In Nepal, LPG comes in 15.4 kilogram, rather iconic red cylinders. People can be seen carrying these cylinders on their backs, on bicycles, between their legs on mopeds, and suspended between two people in the street.

black-market sprung up practically overnight. Gasoline to fuel this country's countless motorcycles and mopeds could be bought out of one liter water bottles. Black-market prices generally were 200-300% higher than the government rationing price, putting even more economic strain on families still in the midst of recovering from the earthquake.



5. Water boils in a solar cooker in front of a monastery in Jharkot, Mustang, Nepal. Photo by the author.

Many people sought alternative sources of fuel. Wood and dung became fuel for cooking fires. In mountain communities, even more reliance was put on solar cookers. Demand for electricity grew, even as load shedding went from eight hours a day up to twelve, and eventually sixteen as hydropower produced less energy in the winter dry season. Restaurants came out with 'fuel crisis' menus, which excluded energy intensive dishes such as fried momos or baked goods. LPG, which costs about 1400 Nepali rupees at the government stated price was selling for up to 8000 rupees on the black market.²³ This political issue put a brake on earthquake recovery efforts, as attention shifted focus to issues caused by the blockade and transportation costs skyrocketed.

²³ (Anonymous 2016) – Tashi Ling

Geographical Context

My research was conducted in three major locations: Rasuwa District, Nuwakot District, and Kathmandu. Approximately ten days were spent alone in Rasuwa district, conducting interviews with local people, making observations, and gauging the level of aid that reached mountain communities. Then, about six days were spent in Kathmandu following up with contacts made in the initial trip. This led to a second trip to Rasuwa, this time with the American Red Cross and Nepal Red Cross Society. At the beginning of this trip, I spent about four days in Nuwakot District in the vicinity of Trishuli. With the Red Cross, I observed a CGI distribution campaign and had ample opportunity to informally talk about the state of affairs in Rasuwa District.

Following are two maps. The first places Rasuwa and Nuwakot Districts within Nepal. The second is a detailed map of Rasuwa District, which shows the Langtang valley (where a majority of interviews with locals were conducted). Most of this district lies within Langtang National Park. This means some special restrictions and rules are in place. First of all, all visitors (including aid-workers) must pay a 3390 NR single entry fee to enter the National Park near Dhunche.²⁴ In addition, visitors generally need to be registered in the Trekker Information Management System (TIMS) and must be ready to produce the necessary documentation. Police and military check posts are present throughout the region to ensure compliance. The only explanation given for these check posts is that they are to search for poachers who illegally hunt within the national park.

Langtang National Park encompasses three districts (Rasuwa, Nuwakot, and Sindhupalchuk) and has incredible ecological diversity. The climate ranges from sub-tropical Sal forest in the south, into hill forest of primarily rhododendron and alder, and finally up to sub-alpine and alpine zones as one goes higher into the mountains. In the hill forest and lower sub-alpine, ecosystems are dominated by oak, silver fir, hemlock, and larch forests.²⁵ At the highest elevations, the trees cannot grow and the juniper and rhododendron shrubs slowly disappear as the climate shifts into high alpine meadows. Within the national park, there are significant numbers of the red panda, Himalayan black bear, snow leopard, and various native ungulates.²⁶ These are the animals reportedly being protected by the military searches of vehicles, passengers, and bags.

²⁴ This entrance fee is waived for Nepali nationals, or anyone who ‘looks like a Nepali’ and simply keeps quiet as they pass through the checkpoint.

²⁵ The larch is my favorite species of tree. Larch are a deciduous conifer (!) which grows primarily in mountain regions around the world. I first encountered larch in lower British Columbia, Canada in the E.C. Manning Provincial Park. In the park, there is a Golden Larch forest with trees that are around 2000 years old.

²⁶ (Langtang National Park n.d.)

By Region (5) and District (75)



Map adapted from <http://xplornepal.blogspot.com/2010/12/map-of-nepal.html>

NPC GIS Facility, LPSPP, 2004



8. Detailed map of the Rasuwa and Nuwakot regions where I conducted interviews. Map taken from <http://www.langtangtrekkinginnepal.com/maps/langtang-valley-trekking-map.jpg>

NGOs

There are thousands of NGOs, both local and international, operating in Nepal (some estimates go as high as 15,000).²⁷ This section will focus on two organizations: All Hands and the Red Cross.

All Hands

All Hands is an international organization started by David Campbell, an American businessman, after the December 2004 tsunami in Indonesia. Since its inception just over ten years ago, All Hands has grown from a spontaneous amalgamation of volunteers who happened to be in a disaster-stricken area into one of the world's largest volunteer organizations that operates in post-disaster regions. As such, All Hands is an official 501(c)3 non-profit that is based out of the United States.²⁸ They respond to emergencies within the U.S. such as Hurricane Sandy, flooding in Colorado, and countless other natural disasters. Internationally, they respond to large natural disasters such as typhoons, tsunamis, and earthquakes with operations primarily spread across Asia and Central/South America.²⁹

In Nepal, All Hands is currently operating in two districts: Nuwakot and Sindhupalchok. Their Nuwakot operations consist of 'rubbling,' or the safe demolition of damaged buildings, and the building of schools. Currently they are in a campaign to do '10 in 10': the goal is to completely finish ten demolition sites over the course of ten days. Safe demolition takes a surprising amount of time – generally a team of 8-10 people will work on the site for eight hours a day, six days a week. This means each site takes somewhere between 640 and 800 man-hours of labor to completely demolish. And that is just tearing things down! On the school side, they are working on five separate school sites with approximately three buildings being constructed at each site.³⁰

With All Hands in Nuwakot, there are between fifteen and eighty international volunteers onsite at any given time, with an equal or greater number of locals volunteering and working for wages on the same projects. This volunteer organization also seeks to conduct their operations in a long-term, sustainable manner. According to their website, All Hands seeks to be nimble and adaptable to local circumstances, seeks out underserved communities, collaborate with the government and other NGOs when possible, use locally available materials, work with local experts and community members, and learn from the communities being served.³¹

One reason All Hands is focusing on the rebuilding of schools is for the safety of children in Nuwakot. The Nuwakot district (particularly along the Trishuli-Dhunge Highway) is a high child-trafficking area. When children are not in school, it requires much more vigilance from parents, who have largely been busy trying to rebuild homes and lives.

²⁷ (Visit Nepal n.d.)

²⁸ (All Hands Volunteers n.d.) – About Us

²⁹ (All Hands Volunteers n.d.) – All Programs

³⁰ (All Hands 2016)

³¹ (All Hands Volunteers n.d.) – About Us

Without schools, or when children are walking longer distances to different schools, their chances of disappearing are much higher. In order to directly combat this problem, schools are some of the first buildings being rebuilt. Of course, it is also important to get kids back in school for the sake of their education and futures!

One issue with organizations such as All Hands is the high turnover rate of staff. International visitors can only stay in Nepal for five months in one calendar year on the tourist visa (which is generally the kind of visa being used by All Hands). To get around this rule, a person can come in August and stay until May (for a total of ten months) since the ‘calendar year’ resets on January 1st. Furthermore, many volunteers will only work with All Hands for a few days or maybe two weeks. While it is still helpful to have laborers, this means that it can be quite a challenge to retain skilled labor and leadership. One of the main ways around this is employing local staff, which both empowers the local community and provides temporal continuity.

The values of All Hands, particularly the community involvement and direction from local people, distinguish it (at least from my research and experience) as an ethical volunteer organization. Next Generation Nepal (NGN) gives seven major tips for ‘voluntourists’ in Nepal. First of all, there are many for-profit, exploitative organizations disguised as non-profits in Nepal, particularly orphanages. Children are sometimes kidnapped or taken from trusting parents to populate these ‘orphanages’ which then host international volunteers. The volunteers often have to pay a large sum of money to spend time at the orphanage helping the children. NGN also suggests taking on “a learning mindset,” and in so doing realize that the volunteer may spend more time learning about a different culture and way of life than actually helping people. This is qualified, however, with the idea that cross cultural exchange is inherently valuable. In the end, NGN says that if one cannot find an organization that is ‘ethical,’ that one simply conducts themselves as an ethical tourist – support the economy by buying locally, hiring local people as guides, and seeking out two way communication and cultural exchange.³²

The Red Cross

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (I will refer to them as ‘the Red Cross’ or IFRC) is an internationally recognized NGO with operations in more than 190 countries.³³ My second trip to the Rasuwa District was with the American Red Cross (ARC) and Nepal Red Cross Society (NRCS). In Nepal, the ARC is generally acting as a *donor agency*, which means that they primarily provide funding and outside support to the *implementing agency*, which is the Nepal Red Cross Society.

The response of the multitude of NGOs working in Nepal after the earthquake were organized into issue-based “clusters.” These eleven clusters are food security, health, nutrition, water and sanitation, education, protection (child and gender based violence), shelter (emergency and early recovery), camp coordination and management, logistics

³² (Next Generation Nepal n.d.)

³³ (International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies n.d.)

(remote access operations), emergency communication, and early recovery.³⁴ The logic behind a cluster is simple; agencies or organizations doing similar work should coordinate their efforts so that there is minimal overlap and maximum coverage. Having issue based clusters facilitates this communication in the hectic environment following a major natural disaster.

In addition, each cluster has a ‘lead’ from an international organization as well as a Nepali government liaison. For example, the health cluster lead is from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the government liaison is from the Nepal Ministry of Health and Population. The Nepal Red Cross Society is the lead organization for emergency shelter – which is why the NRCS was delivering temporary shelter materials to Rasuwa District. NGOs, both local and international, supplement and expand upon the services provided by the government. In Nepal, this is an absolutely critical role.

The Government

The Nepali government is central to the rebuilding process and all earthquake relief in the country. As has been alluded to previously, there have been a number of stumbling blocks over the last twelve months. In the aftermath of the quake, it has been argued that political leaders put more effort into fast-tracking the new constitution than focusing on the humanitarian needs of the Nepali people.³⁵ The passage of the new constitution led to a blockade, which seriously compromised transportation and the availability of critical goods, such as medicine and food.

The National Reconstruction Authority (NRA) was created by the Nepali legislature to dispense the \$4.1 billion USD pledged by international donors.³⁶ However, the assembly of the National Reconstruction Authority into a coherent body with a single leader took eight months: the director was appointed on December 25th, 2015.³⁷ According to many of the people I talked to in Rasuwa and Nuwakot, it took so long because of political bickering over who would hold the position of director. This government appointed position obviously holds a lot of power because of the \$4.1 billion dollar check book. Unfortunately, precious time for rebuilding was lost during the drawn out decision process.

Since the NRA holds the proverbial check book, their rule is essentially law. Soon after the earthquake, monetary disbursements were promised to Nepali people who had their homes destroyed in the earthquake, to help offset the cost of reconstruction. Those monetary disbursements did not start being distributed in Rasuwa District until this month, a full year after the earthquake.³⁸

³⁴ (Cluster Contact List 2015)

³⁵ (Plesch 2015)

³⁶ (Government of Nepal - National Reconstruction Authority n.d.)

³⁷ (Pradhan 2015)

³⁸ Conversations with the Red Cross folks in Rasuwa District.

The NRA has also controlled the operations of NGOs within the country, with the stated goal of having a coordinated and egalitarian distribution of aid. Unfortunately, that has meant that the NRA explicitly banned NGOs from beginning to rebuild personal homes until approval was given by the NRA.³⁹ The NRA only started granting approval in April 2016, months after organizations could have jumpstarted the rebuilding process. Their hands tied, NGOs and the Nepali people have done all they can within the restrictions. Organizations such as All Hands and IOM Nepal have worked on reconstructing schools and community buildings, structures that are not personal homes so are excluded from the rule. In addition, some organizations have built ‘model homes’ which are to be used to exhibit approved building architecture, sustainable design, and earthquake resistant building techniques.

In the absence of a timely government distribution of funds, many people simply decided to begin rebuilding on their own, using their own savings or materials. One man from Syabru Bensi in Rasuwa District had planned on building a new home for years. Around 2013, he bought and had delivered all of the materials to build his new home. However, life events got in the way and the supplies ended up sitting in a cleared bit of land for years. In 2015 after his old house was destroyed in the earthquake, he decided it was a sign to build his new house which was completed in early 2016.

The delay caused by the NRA has not been a total waste of time. Organizations such as the Red Cross and IOM Nepal have conducted dozens of trainings to produce a veritable army of masons, carpenters, and other skilled laborers who will be needed to build new homes. In addition, mills have been set up in the mountains to produce wood framing and structural elements. Throughout Rasuwa District, one can also observe men, women, and children breaking apart stones into gravel that will be used in foundations and walls. The identification, production, and delivery (often by foot or pack animal) of these supplies through the mountains is also no small task.⁴⁰

³⁹ (IOM Nepal 2016)

⁴⁰ (International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies n.d.)

The People

Tenzin

Tenzin Tamang⁴¹ is a middle aged woman operating the Tibet Guest House in Sherpagaun. Sherpagaun is a small village clinging to the south face of a ridge extending down from Langtang I. The village is located at 2563 meters, or approximately 8,400 feet,



9. Tenzin Tamang standing in front of her damaged home in April 2016. Photo by the author.

above sea level. Tenzin and her family originally came from Tibet and settled in the village of Langtang, further up the valley. However, in the mid 1990's Tenzin married a man from Sherpagaun and moved. In 2013, Tenzin's husband died after a protracted battle with cancer. During the earthquake, Tenzin's home and guest house were badly damaged in the shaking, to the point that they are no longer livable.

After the earthquake, Tenzin describes her experience as "very difficult." With "house broken. No husband," Tenzin has been struggling to navigate the land ownership laws in Nepal, which significantly favor men. In addition, Tenzin told me that there was "no aid. No help here in the hills."

All of Tenzin's blood relatives were in Langtang on April 25th, 2015. Shortly before noon, when the earthquake hit, approximately 7 million cubic meters of rock, snow, and ice was released from the towering mountain slope that rises 3000 meters behind the village of Langtang. These debris came blasting down the mountainside, landing with a force that is estimated to be equivalent to half of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima in 1945. Trees and

houses up and down the valley were blown down by the immense pressure wave, and the village of Langtang was buried by approximately 60 meters of rubble. Nearly 400 people were dead or missing, including all of Tenzin's family.⁴² Only one building remained in the village, tucked close to the cliff side and a little further north than the rest of the village.

⁴¹ Tenzin's name has been changed, although she did give permission for her name to be published in connection with her story.

⁴² (Qiu 2016)



10. Tenzin standing in front of the temporary shelter where she has been living with her deceased-husband's family for the last twelve months. Photo by the author.

Tenzin has been living with her mother in law and other members of her husband's side of the family since the earthquake. They are all living in a temporary shelter in the backyard of her old house. It is made of CGI sheeting, tarpaulin, and bamboo framing. For income, Tenzin has

rented the neighboring Tibet Guest House. The real owner has left and is now living in Kathmandu. Unfortunately, since the earthquake, the number of trekkers coming through Sherpagaun has decreased dramatically. This means that Tenzin is barely breaking even with the Tibet Guest House, and is struggling to make enough money to buy essentials such as food and firewood (which are expensive on the mountainside).

Tenzin's story is important to share, because she is one of the millions of people somehow impacted by the earthquake and is relying on the promised government aid. When that aid is delayed or missing it is people like Tenzin who suffer the consequences. A thorough discussion of humanitarian relief is never complete without the stories of stakeholders; the beneficiaries, the recipients, the people affected by disaster.

Bibek

Bibek is a young Nepali man working for a non-profit organization based out of Kathmandu, which is currently working to rebuild a school in Bangthali in Kavre.⁴³ Bibek is an incredibly optimistic, positive person. He firmly believes that a future Nepal can be made better, and that the best path to that future is through improved educational opportunities for the youngest generation. Talking to Bibek, his positivity was infectious. He was all too cognizant of the challenges facing his mountain nation but that did not discourage him. Talking to Bibek, I was struck by his ferocity of spirit and desire to do something good for Nepal. I am including this short blurb on Bibek because it is all too easy to get bogged down in the narrative that nothing will change. If the multitude of people like Bibek have their way, Nepal will be well on its way to prosperity and success in the next thirty years.

⁴³ Bibek never gave express permission for his name or organization to be included in this article, so personal identifiers have been changed or removed from this section.

Lobsang

Lobsang⁴⁴ owns a guest house in Lama Hotel with her husband, Karma. She has seven children, including two fraternal twins, who are all living in Kathmandu now. Lobsang just finished the final repairs to their guesthouse and opened in time for the spring tourist season. In addition, they have planted a garden to grow vegetables (which are scarce as you move higher up the Langtang valley), but have yet to benefit from the fruits of their labor.

During the April 2015 earthquake, one of Lobsang's brothers died. Lobsang expresses gratefulness that the rest of her family – two other brothers, her husband, seven children, and mother – were safe. After the earthquake, Lobsang and her husband moved outside and slept in a tent outside of the guesthouse. Soon thereafter, Lobsang went to Kathmandu to be with her children.

Lobsang's husband, Karma, originally came from Tibet. When he was seven years old, he made it across the border in the Mustang region. He lived there, near Muktinath, for about fifteen years before crossing Thorung-La pass (5,416 meters)⁴⁵ into the Manang district where he spent six years. He then traveled to Kathmandu for a little less than a year before walking nine days up to Lama Hotel, in the Rasuwa District, where he has settled down. Over the years he has worked as trekking guide, porter, cook, and hotel owner. After the earthquake, while his wife left for Kathmandu, he stayed in Lama Hotel to start repairing the guest house and their home. He says that most of the other villagers came back in January and February in order to complete repairs before the spring tourist season started in March.

Economically, things have been challenging since the earthquake. The government assesses a 10,000 rupee tax on all guest houses operating along the main Langtang trekking route. This tax is reportedly easy to afford in a regular season when there are many trekkers coming through, but last fall (in the high season) there were very few tourists in the region. Despite the earthquake and disrupted economy, the government is still enforcing this flat tax – guest houses that do not pay will be shut down.

Conclusion

April 25th, 2015 marked a dramatic event in Nepal's recent history, one that is being dealt with on a daily basis one year later and will continue to be a part of the national consciousness for years to come. In the immediate aftermath of the quake, money and resources poured into the country as part of an international response. These resources, from international donors as well as the Nepali government, alleviated the symptoms of a growing humanitarian crisis. In the months that followed, \$4.1 billion USD were pledged to Nepal to aid in the reconstruction process. While that is a large figure, it is estimated that the earthquake caused over \$7 billion USD in damage and lost economic productivity.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Lobsang's name (and the name of her husband) have been changed in this article to protect their identities and privacy.

⁴⁵ Among many other life experiences, Karma has indeed "been on the pass."

⁴⁶ (Pandey 2016)

At the same time, political jockeying over the new constitution and the to-be-elected head of the National Reconstruction Authority aggravated the myriad problems already facing the country. The new constitution, passed in September 2015, led to Nepal's second crisis: the blockade. The blockade compromised the flow of critical supplies into Nepal at a time when they were direly needed. The scarcity of fuel and medical supplies put a serious damper on earthquake recovery efforts.⁴⁷

One year later, frustrations were running rampant among the Nepali people waiting to rebuild their homes and the aid workers that want to help them do so. Delays in the distribution of promised monetary disbursements and approved rebuilding plans by the NRA were at the top of the list of complaints. In addition, certain communities in Rasuwa District felt that they had been skipped over entirely in the distribution of relief supplies.⁴⁸

However, the local political climate and existing infrastructure are sure to pose unique challenges in any post-disaster scenario. In Nepal, those unique challenges include access to remote mountain communities and a nascent government (after ten years of insurgency from 1996 to 2006). It would be foolish to think that these unique circumstances would *not* play into a nationally significant event, especially a traumatic incident that changed the lives of millions of citizens.

I am not seeking to invalidate the claims of people against the government, I am only trying to recognize the immense challenge that the people and the government of Nepal currently face. I firmly believe that the experiences of the Nepali people and the lessons learned (particularly that response and follow up must be timely) will leave Nepal better prepared for the next natural disaster. On April 26th, 2013 (almost exactly two years before the earthquake), an article was published predicting the effects of a 9.0 magnitude earthquake hitting Nepal.⁴⁹ The article predicted 380,000 deaths as a result of the earthquake, with millions more displaced. It also suggested that all rebuilding efforts would be centered on the Kathmandu valley, neglecting rural regions throughout the rest of the country.

When the 7.8 magnitude quake hit Nepal two years later, the death toll came in at about 9,000 people, and by many accounts aid *has* reached remote mountain communities.⁵⁰ There are two major reasons for this huge gap between prediction and reality. First, this earthquake did not produce high-frequency waves which are most strongly associated with building damage. Second, the magnitude of this earthquake was ten times weaker⁵¹ than the predicted scenario.⁵² However, geological models predict that a larger earthquake (around magnitude 9.0) is still due sometime in the next thirty years. With this in mind, the lessons learned in the last year could prove invaluable in the effectiveness of future disaster response.

⁴⁷ (Soelaksono 2016)

⁴⁸ (Tenzin 2016)

⁴⁹ (Knight 2013)

⁵⁰ (Morelle 2015)

⁵¹ Earthquake magnitudes are measured on a logarithmic scale. Therefore, a 9.0 earthquake is ten times as severe as an 8.0 and one hundred times more severe than a 7.0.

⁵² (Avouac, et al. 2015)

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Appendix I: Interview Questions

- Do you live here year round?
- Where were you when the earthquake happened?
- Where did you sleep immediately after the earthquake?
- Did you have a bed? Were you given a tarp? Where did it come from, and how soon after the earthquake?
- Where did you get water and food?
- Did you get sick?
- Did you have relatives who helped you after the earthquake? What did they do for you?
- Did any organizations help you? Do you remember which ones? What exactly did they do?
- Did you go somewhere else after the earthquake? How long did you stay there?
- Do you have any children? Are they in school? When did they go back to school?
- What happened to other family members during the earthquake?
- Have you noticed anything different about yourself since the earthquake?
- How have your daily habits/actions/routines changed?

Appendix II: Acronyms, Abbreviations, and Organizations

- | | |
|-------------|--|
| • ARC | American Red Cross |
| • CGI | Corrugated Galvanized Iron (or steel - sheeting) |
| • DDRC | District Disaster Relief Committee |
| • DUDBC | Dept. of Urban Development & Building Construction |
| • EMT | Emergency Medical Technician |
| • IDP | Internally Displaced Persons |
| • IOM Nepal | International Organization for Migration |
| • LDO | Local Development Officer |
| • LPG | Liquid Propane Gas |
| • NGN | Next Generation Nepal |
| • NRA | National Reconstruction Authority |
| • NRCS | Nepal Red Cross Society |
| • SARAID | Search and Rescue Aid in Disasters |
| • TIMS | Trekker Information Management System |
| • UNHCR | United Nations Refugee Agency |
| • UNICEF | United Nations Children's Agency |
| • VDC | Village Development Committee |
| • WHO | United Nations World Health Organization |

Appendix III: Research Methodology

Interviews and research were conducted throughout the month of April 2016, approximately one year after the April 25th, 2015 earthquake. Interviews were conducted primarily with English language speakers. This is a serious limitation of the stories and information gathered. My original plan was to find someone in Rasuwa District whom I could hire for the duration of my stay to act as a translator/co-researcher. However, upon arrival I could not find a single person willing or able to fulfill this role. On my second trip to Rasuwa District, I was with the Nepal Red Cross Society team which included a number of people who spoke both Nepali and English. These people acted as translators during my second trip.

For the most part, names have been changed to protect the privacy of interviewees. Most people interviewed fully consented to having their names published in connection with their stories, but due to the potentially sensitive nature of reconstruction and government criticism, their names have been changed anyway. When conducting interviews, I stated that the research is being used for an undergraduate study project that will be available in the public domain. I told interviewees that they can skip any questions they felt uncomfortable answering as well as informing them of their right to remain anonymous or end the interview at any time. By and large, the bulk of my research came from small, informal conversations on the side of the trail or at project sites. In these instances, I cite no name because the participants were given a much abbreviated explanation of my purpose (“I am a student doing a research project on aid after last year’s earthquakes”). In the paper, I fact check the information gained from these informal conversations with a publicly available resource (whenever possible), which is then cited.

Suggestions for Future Research

I highly recommend hiring a translator in Kathmandu if you plan on doing research in the field. My research would have been *much* more extensive and comprehensive if it weren’t for the paucity of local translators. It would be interesting to follow up on rebuilding efforts in Nepal as time goes on. I wish that my research had included interviews with people working in the Nepali government, but none of my leads came to fruition. An in depth analysis of volunteers in Nepal could also prove to be very interesting. This project was originally going to look at the response of monasteries after the earthquake. I ended up taking a different direction, but still believe that the role of religion and religious organizations in the immediate aftermath of a disaster could lead to some fascinating stories.

Photos of the Author



Andrew Boyer (goofy looking white man with the beard, front and center) at a community event in Dhunche, Rasuwa District. Pictured with a staff member of the American Red Cross (blue shirt).



Andrew Boyer pictured with Lobsang in the village of Lama Hotel, Rasuwa District.